

## The 'Turkish villain' made us who we are

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Keep your friends close but your enemies closer, the saying goes. It is a piece of advice Malta's earliest literary movements seem to have heeded religiously, even if in a somewhat perverse manner.

The idea of the "Turkish villain", in fact, and all of its racist and Islamophobic connotations, was kept alive by the founders of Maltese literature well after the Ottoman Empire no longer posed any real threat to the Maltese Islands, a series of academics pointed out at a seminar yesterday.

Seminal literary figures such as Giananton Vassallo and Guzè Muscat Azzopardi were using Malta's confrontation with the Arab infidel well over half a century after the start of British rule.

The emphasis, however, was really a reaction to the British colonial experience. "By emphasising episodes in Maltese history which could support a claim not only that this was a civilised population but that it was a valiant defender of the faith, these writers were making an argument for their country to be considered European," Akkademja tal-Malti president Marco Galea explained.

In other words, by reviving its adversary role with the Turks, and emphasising the distinction between Maltese and Arabs, often in a pejorative way, the writers of the time were trying to establish that, even though the Maltese were colonised, and therefore inferior, they were less so than others.

The seminar, aptly titled; Ta' Barra Minn Hawn: Ir-Razza u r-Radika fil-Letteratura Maltija, dealt with racist and xenophobic constructs in Maltese literature mostly but also included an analysis of national symbols in architecture and art, by Raphael Vella, and a discussion of contemporary terminology used in the representation of immigrants by Fr Paul Pace from the Jesuit Refugee Service.

The pattern of constructing Turks - often erroneously taken to be synonymous with Arabs - Jews and blacks in a derogatory way is largely consistent throughout the work of key literary figures such as Guzè Aquilina and Dun Karm.

A substantial part of our 19th century literature often portrays Turks and Arabs, among others, as ugly, dirty, evil and ruthless, in stark contrast to the Maltese who come across as valiant, good-natured and above all piously Christian.

Even Manwel Dimech, one of the first anti-colonial voices in the pre-war period and certainly not known for any loyal support of the Church, argued Michael Grech, was not immune from these assumptions.

Despite having voiced his sympathy for the colonised rather than the coloniser in countless occasions, for Dimech, the Maltese were what the Arabs and particularly Africans were not, legitimate pretenders to the European enlightenment heritage.

The point of highlighting these issues with the literature and thoughts of these historic figures, both Mr Grech and Adrian Grima - another speaker at the seminar - emphasised, is not to discredit their contributions but to reveal the cultural assumptions their work hinges on and therefore be able to assess it critically, well over a century after it was written, in many cases.

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